



Indiana State Department of Health

Epidemiology Resource Center

Quick Facts

About...Plague

What is plague?

Plague is a bacterial infection caused by *Yersinia pestis*. Plague can be found in most parts of the world. There are three kinds of plague infection: bubonic (lymph node), septicemic (blood), and pneumonic (lung).

How is plague spread?

Bubonic (lymph node) plague is spread through bites from plague infected fleas or insects. Humans may become infected after a large number of rodents have died from plague. Once the rats die, the fleas on the rats move to humans. Bubonic plague is NOT spread from person to person.

Septicemic (blood) plague is classified as primary or secondary. Primary septicemic plague is spread by direct contact with tissues or fluids from working with sick or dead animals. Secondary septicemic plague happens when the bacteria from bubonic plague invade the bloodstream. Septicemic plague is NOT spread from person to person.

Pneumonic (lung) plague is also classified as primary or secondary. Pneumonic plague IS spread from person to person. Primary pneumonic plague is spread through close contact with a person or animal that has pneumonic plague. It is spread from person to person (or animal to person) via mouth and throat droplets. Secondary pneumonic plague occurs when the bacteria spreads to the lungs through the blood in a person with bubonic or septicemic plague.

Who is at risk for plague?

Outbreaks in people are often from rodents and their fleas that live in the home. This may occur in areas where housing and sanitation are poor. Cases in the United States are most often in the Southwestern states.

How do I know if I have plague?

Patients get symptoms of bubonic plague 1-8 days after being bitten by a flea. Symptoms include sudden onset of fever, chills, weakness, and a swollen or tender lymph node called a bubo, which often forms within 1 day. Buboes can be found in the groin, armpits, or neck regions and can be very painful.

Patients get symptoms of pneumonic plague 1-4 days after infection. Symptoms of pneumonic plague include pneumonia, chest pain, having a hard time breathing, and cough.

How is plague treated?

Bubonic and pneumonic plague can be treated with antibiotics. Pneumonic plague can be more serious and may require advanced medical care.

How is plague prevented?

There is no vaccine in the United States. Reduce your risk with good rodent control efforts and avoid contact with wild animals.

All information presented is intended for public use. For more information, please refer to: <http://www.cdc.gov/plague/>.

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